designating tube-receiving areas 330 and 332, such as raised numerals 306, may be provided on the tray, such as on central wall 304.

Each tray 300 may also include boss structures 308, shown in the illustrated embodiment to be integrally formed with the end-most dividers 302. An upright inverted U-shaped handle (not shown) may be attached to the tray at boss structures 308 or some other suitable location. Upright handles can facilitate handling of the tray 300 when loading and unloading the tray 300 through the arcuate carousel door 80, but are not necessarily preferred.

A gap is provided between adjacent dividers 302 so that bar-code labels 334, or other readable or scannable information, on the tubes 320 is accessible when the tube is placed in the tray 300. When a tray 300 carried on wheel 250 passes beneath the plate 138 of the specimen cover, one tube 320 in a curved row at a radially-inward position with respect to wall structure 304 will be aligned with first opening 142 and another tube 320 in a curved row at a radially-outward position with respect to wall 304 will be aligned with second opening 140. The ring 250 is indexed to sequentially move each tube 320 beneath the openings 140, 142 to permit access to the tubes.

Referring again to FIGURE 5, bar code scanners 272 and 274 are disposed adjacent the ring 250. Opticon, Inc. scanners, model number LHA2126RR1S-032, available from Opticon, Inc. of Orangeburg, New York, are preferred. Scanner 272 is located outside ring 250, and scanner 274 is disposed inside ring 250. Scanners 272 and 274 are positioned to scan bar code data labels on each specimen tube 320 carried in the specimen tube tray 300 as the ring 250 rotates a tray 300 of specimen tubes 320 past the scanners 272, 274. In addition, the scanners 272, 274 scan the bar code label 337 (see FIGURE 55) on the outer portion of bent flanges 316 and 318 of end wall 303 of each tray 300 as the tray 300 is brought into the specimen preparation area. Various information, such as specimen and assay identification, can be placed on the tubes and/or each tray 300, and this information can be scanned by the scanners 272, 274 and stored in the central processing computer. If no specimen tube is present, the tray 300 presents a special code 335 (see FIGURE 55) to be read by the scanners 272, 274.

PIPETTE TIP WHEEL

As shown primarily in FIGURES 5 and 6, a second ring assembly of the preferred embodiment is a pipette tip wheel 350 and comprises a circular ring 352 at a bottom portion thereof, a top panel 374 defining a circular inner periphery and five circumferentially-spaced,

radially-protruding sections 370, and a plurality of generally rectangular risers 354 separating the top panel 374 from the ring 352 and preferably held in place by mechanical fasteners 356 extending through the top panel 374 and ring 352 into the risers 354. Five rectangular openings 358 are formed in the top panel 374 proximate each of the sections 370, and a rectangular box 376 is disposed beneath panel 374, one at each opening 358. Top panel 374, ring 352, and risers 354 are preferably made from machined aluminum, and boxes 376 are preferably formed from stainless steel sheet stock.

The openings 358 and associated boxes 376 are constructed and arranged to receive trays 372 holding a plurality of disposable pipette tips. The pipette tip trays 372 are preferably those manufactured and sold by TECAN (TECAN U.S. Inc., Research Triangle Park, North Carolina) under the trade name "Disposable Tips for GENESIS Series". Each tip has a 1000 μl capacity and is conductive. Each tray holds ninety-six elongated disposable tips.

Lateral slots 378 and longitudinal slots 380 are formed in the top panel 374 along the lateral and longitudinal edges, respectively, of each opening 358. The slots 378, 380 receive downwardly-extending flanges (not shown) disposed along the lateral and longitudinal edges of the trays 372. The slots 378, 380 and associated flanges of the trays 372 serve to properly register the trays 372 with respect to openings 358 and to hold the trays 372 in place on the panel 374.

Pipette tip wheel 350 is preferably rotationally supported by three 120°-spaced V-groove rollers 357, 360, 361 which engage a continuous V-ridge 362 formed on the inner periphery of ring 352, as shown in FIGURES 5, 6, and 6A, so that the pipette tip wheel 350 is rotatable about a second central axis of rotation that is generally parallel to the first axis of rotation of the specimen ring 250. The rollers are preferably made by Bishop-Wisecarver Corp. of Pittsburg, California, model number W1SSX. Rollers 357 and 360 are rotationally mounted on fixed shafts, and roller 361 is mounted on a bracket which pivots about a vertical axis and is spring biased so as to urge roller 361 radially outwardly against the inner periphery of ring 352. Having two fixed rollers and one radially movable roller allows the three rollers to accommodate an out-of-round inner periphery of ring 352. In addition, the wheel 350 can be easily installed and removed by merely pushing pivoting roller 361 radially inwardly to allow the ring 352 to move laterally to disengage continuous V-ridge 362 from the fixed V-groove rollers 357, 360.

Pipette tip wheel 350 is driven by a motor 364 having a shaft-mounted spur gear which meshes with mating gear teeth formed on an outer perimeter of ring 352. Motor 364 is

preferably a VEXTA gear head stepper motor, model number PK243-A1-SG7.2, having a 7.2:1 gear reduction and available from Oriental Motor Co., Ltd. of Tokyo, Japan. A gear head stepper motor with a 7.2:1 gear reduction is preferred because it provides smooth motion of the pipette tip wheel 350, where the spur gear of the motor 364 is directly engaged with the ring 352.

A home sensor and a sector sensor (not shown), preferably slotted optical sensors, are provided adjacent the pipette tip wheel 350 at a rotational home position and at a position of one of the boxes 376. The pipette tip wheel 350 includes a home flag (not shown) located at a home position on the wheel and five equally-spaced sector flags (not shown) corresponding to the positions of each of the five boxes 376. The home flag and sector flags cooperate with the home sensor and sector sensors to provide wheel position information to the assay manager program and to control the pipette tip wheel 350 to stop at five discrete positions corresponding to established coordinates for user re-load and access by pipette unit 450. Preferred sensors for the home sensor and sector sensor are Optek Technology, Inc. slotted optical sensors, model number OPB980, available from Optek Technology, Inc. of Carrollton, Texas.

MULTI-AXIS MIXER

Referring to FIGURES 7-12, the multi-axis mixer 400 includes a rotating turntable structure 414 (see FIGURE 10) rotatably mounted on a center shaft 428 supported in center bearings 430 to a fixed base 402 mounted to the jig plate 130 by means of mechanical fasteners (not shown) extending through apertures 419 formed about the outer periphery of the fixed base 402. A cover member 404 is attached to and rotates with turntable 414.

Turntable 414 is preferably in the form of a right angle cross comprising three 90°-spaced rectangular arms 444 of equal length extending radially outwardly from the center of the turntable 414 and a fourth arm 445 having an extension 417 making arm 445 slightly longer than arms 444. As shown in FIGURES 10-12, the center portion of turntable 414 is connected to center shaft 428 by a screw 429.

Four container holders 406 are disposed on the ends of the arms 444 and 445 of turntable frame 414. Each container holder 406 is attached to one of four vertical shafts 423, which are rotatably supported in container holder bearings 415. Container holder bearings 415 are pressed into the arms 444, 445 of the turntable 414 and are disposed at equal radial distances from shaft 428.